

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the Meeting held on 18 October 2018 at 3.30 pm

Present:

Councillor P H MurphyChairman
Councillor N ThwaitesVice-Chairman

Councillor I Aldridge
Councillor R Clifford
Councillor G S Dowding

Councillor J Parbrook
Councillor P Pilkington
Councillor R Woods

Members in Attendance:

Councillor A Trollope-Bellew
Councillor N Hawkins

Councillor K Turner

Officers in Attendance:

Advice and Homelessness Manager (H Stewart)
Empty Homes Co-ordinator (S Perry)
Governance and Democracy Specialist (M Prouse)
Governance, Democracy and Executive Support Case Manager (C Rendell)

SC 12 Apology for Absence

An apology was received from Councillor R Lillis.

SC 13 Minutes

(Minutes of the Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 14 June 2018 –
circulated with the Agenda.)

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on 14 June 2018
be confirmed as a correct record.

SC 14 Declarations of Interest

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in
their capacity as a Member of a County, Parish or Town Council:-

WEST SOMERSET COUNCIL
Scrutiny Committee 18.10.18

Name	Minute No.	Description of Interest	Personal or Prejudicial or Disclosable Pecuniary	Action Taken
Cllr I Aldridge	All items	Williton	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr P Murphy	All items	Watchet	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr J Parbrook	All items	Minehead	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr P Pilkington	All items	Timberscombe	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr A Trollope-Bellew	All items	Crowcombe	Personal	Spoke
Cllr K Turner	All items	Brompton Ralph	Personal	Spoke

Councillor Clifford further declared a personal interest as Chair of the West Somerset Advice Bureau.

SC 15 Public Participation

No members of public spoke at the meeting on any items on the agenda.

SC 16 Cabinet Key Decisions and Actions

(Copy of the Cabinet Key Decisions from the meeting held on 11 July 2018, circulated at the meeting)

RESOLVED that the Cabinet Key Decisions from the meeting held on 11 July 2018, be noted.

SC 17 Cabinet Forward Plan

(Copy of the Cabinet Forward Plan published on 2 October 2018, circulated at the meeting).

Members highlighted that some of the reports on the Forward Plan would be taken through the Shadow Council process instead of Cabinet and that the document would need to be updated.

RESOLVED that the Cabinet Forward Plan published on 2 October 2018, with amendments, be noted.

SC 18 Chairman's Announcements

The Chairman did not have any matters to announce to the Committee.

SC 19 Homelessness Strategy

The report WSC 33/18 was presented by Councillor K Turner.

The purpose of the report was to provide a detailed account of the results of the Homelessness Review that had been undertaken across the five Districts and proposed an Action Plan that covered the four priorities which included:-

- Supporting the transition in services required by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017;
- Supporting clients to remain in their existing accommodation;

- Supporting clients to access suitable and affordable accommodation; and
- Building and maintaining strong working relationships across partnerships.

The process of review had begun in 2016, but was extended to 2017 due to the introduction and impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 on the partners. From April 2018 to date, there had been a 62% increase in homeless applications at both Taunton Deane Borough Council (TDBC) and West Somerset Council (WSC) in approaches that consisted of both singles (expected) and families (unexpected), especially in families who were intentionally homeless.

The Review had considered the way homelessness services were delivered across the area and had established current levels of homelessness, who were becoming homeless locally and why, and examined the trends in homelessness. It had also considered available accommodation and support services to identify gaps in provision.

Most importantly, it also expounded on the problems encountered in the delivery of the outgoing Action Plan and homelessness issues that affected the region, one of which that was highlighted, was the housing options for the 25-34 year age group, as they were expected to live in shared accommodation and were restricted to the shared accommodation housing elements of Universal Credit, which in turn created a problem of moving clients on from programmes and freeing up spaces when they reached the age of 25.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- Members highlighted that other Councils had trialed schemes with credit unions and whether the effectiveness of such schemes had been reviewed.
Customers were given advice to approach credit unions for assistance. TDBC and WSC also operated schemes to assist customers with rent in advance and deposits and used discretion when repayment was arranged with customers who were on benefits and Universal Credit. There were also funding schemes available from Hinkley Point.
- Members queried what had caused the increase in homeless applications and whether it was due to the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.
The old Strategy that was used to assist customers was very restrictive, the new Strategy meant that more people were eligible to make an application because the Councils had a duty to house them.
- Members queried what the capacity was to help the increased amount of customers.
The Homelessness Manager advised that it was hard to quantify a figure due to the preventative work that was being carried out, along with the old cases that were still being assisted. She advised she would be able to report back after the second quarter.
- Members queried what would the Homelessness Manager need to effectively deliver the work needed for the new Strategy and the increased amount of homeless applications.
More experienced housing officers would be required.

- Concern was raised that customers would intentionally make themselves homeless because there was more assistance available.
The customer would still be required to provide valid reasons why they had made themselves homeless or would still be required to provide a Section 21 notice.
- Members queried when a customer was classed as homeless.
The Homelessness Manager described the process of homelessness as a train that had three carriages, which were the different stages of homelessness:-
Carriage One – prevention carriage, this was the first step for customers that were under threat of homelessness, they would have received a section 21 notice which lasted for two months;
Carriage Two – this carriage was accessed either via the prevention carriage or directly by the customer because they were roofless, instead of being able to prevent the homelessness in this stage, another 56 days relief was given to find them accommodation; and
Carriage Three – only after the previous carriages, would the officers go back to the homeless duty under the five criteria which was used prior to the new Strategy being introduced and was stricter on customers.
- Members requested clarification that once the two phases were used and if no accommodation had been found, then the obligation ended. However, due to the extended amount of time provided by the two phases, the Strategy gave more options to assist the customer and steer away from the old criteria which was used under the old Strategy.
Yes, there were far more options available to officers under the new Strategy to assist customers with prevention and securing suitable accommodation.
- Members queried what demographical group had required more need.
There had been an increase in single customers requesting help, but there had also been an increase in the amount of families that had come in to make an application.
- Members queried if the increase in young single customers was due to their desire to move out of a rural area to an urban area.
This was not the case in TDBC and WSC. There was more help being given around mediation to keep the young customer at home with their family.
- Concern was raised around matters in relation to the local West Somerset Advice Bureau and the work load that was potentially being created in April 2019, when customers who needed extra assistance on Universal Credit would be passed to their local Advice Bureau.
That information was included in the report because the difficulty that officers had with some customers on Universal Credit required solutions that would be better provided via partnership working with multiple agencies and would be delivered through an Advice Bureau.
- Members queried whether there were any statistics available on ex-servicemen on the homeless register.
The Homelessness Manager was not aware of any listed on the homeless register, but there were some on the Homefinder system.
- Concern was raised that some ex-servicemen might not declare their military background.
The Homelessness Manager advised Members that when customers were interviewed for housing assistance, the interviews were extensive

and would normally take up to a couple of hours, which ensured that detailed information was gathered.

- Members were reassured by the report and thanked the Homelessness Manager for the clarity that the increased homeless figures had gone up due to the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.
- Members were aware that extra funds had been issued from Central Government but queried whether the funds had met the need.
No. Sadly the amount of homelessness applications had gone up across the country and there were not enough funds due to budget cuts being implemented across the board.
- Members queried whether there was information available based on each Ward and whether homes were being filled with local customers.
Reports had been produced by the West Somerset Advice Bureau that gave details on each Ward. Whether homes were being filled with local customers would depend on the Section 106 Agreement that was put in place when planning permission was sought.
- The Chairman thanked the Homelessness Manager for her hard work and passion on the subject matter.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee:-

- a) Provided 'in principle' support to the draft Somerset Homelessness Review and Strategy;
- b) Challenged and scrutinised the detail and identified content that might require further clarity or amendment and provided a view on whether Scrutiny considered some aims and priorities were more important than others; and
- c) Challenged the content of the draft Equalities Impact Assessment and suggested any further additions or amendments.

SC 20 Empty Homes Update

The report WSC 77/18 was presented by Councillor K Turner.

The purpose of the report was to update the Committee on the number of empty homes and the issues within the West Somerset area. The number of long term empty properties in West Somerset had declined by 7%, which was a reduction of 18 properties, the first reduction since 2015.

As a result of the growth in the tax base, the Council could be rewarded through the New Homes Bonus scheme. This included new properties coming on line and also the decrease in empty homes.

This highlighted the value of having the resources available to tackle the work on empty homes and how this could effectively contribute to income generation for the authority under the New Homes Bonus scheme.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- Members requested that work carried out on empty homes was considered in the Shadow Council arrangements.
- Members queried whether the figures included second homes.
Second homes were taken out of the equation, the figures produced were based on long term empty properties, which were properties that had been unoccupied for six months or more.

- Members queried how the Empty Homes Co-ordinator distinguished between the two types of property.
The Empty Homes Co-ordinator used the Council Tax database which identified the difference between second homes and empty properties through information gathered by inspectors and customers. If a property was empty and furnished, it may not be classified as a long term empty on the council tax database. However, if a property was empty and unfurnished, it would be classed as empty property.
- Members queried how accurate the data was.
The figures were very accurate. In the WSC area, the figures reported were good news. However, more resource was needed to be able to work in a proactive manner instead of reactive.
- Members requested further information on enforcement measures mentioned within the report.
The Empty Homes Co-ordinator had been in contact with Blackpool Council, who had carried out an interesting piece of enforcement work by issuing Community Protection Notices (constantly ignoring these could lead to a custodial sentence). The letters used had included very effective wording which appeared to have worked – reducing the need and cost of court action. Further information would be needed to assess whether it would be an effective method for TDBC and WSC to adopt. Currently enforcement action was taken when there were breaches of: environmental health, building control and planning legislation.
- Members queried how the Empty Homes Co-ordinator tackled cases where the owner of an empty property did not live within the area.
The Empty Homes Co-ordinator reported that those types of cases were often complex and not easily tackled, but progress could be made via telephone, email and writing letters.
- Concern was raised on empty properties where their owners were deceased and families used the property for occasional use.
That was a dilemma faced especially in the South West because it was a nice area and families wanted to keep the property in the area for future use. Officers could not influence 'the market' and the property would be classed as a second home.
- Members queried the Council Tax Premiums mentioned in the risk matrix.
A Council Tax Premium was applied to the bill after two years and added an additional percentage to the charge.
- Concern was raised that the application of a premium would generate Council Tax avoidance and the owner might advise that the property was furnished.
The Empty Homes Co-ordinator accepted that might happen. However, if the owner advised that the property was furnished, inspectors would be sent out to check and for a property to be classed as furnished, it would need more than a bed and chair to qualify.
- Members queried what it took for a property to be brought back from being unoccupied to occupied.
The Empty Homes Co-ordinator explained that there were many different scenarios regarding bringing a property back into use. However, grant money always attracted people to get things done.
- Members requested how information was gathered on empty properties.
Empty property review forms were sent out annually to gain data to update our database. Personal visits also helped to gain a lot of information, often from neighbours and the wider community. In addition people often contacted the Empty Homes Co-ordinator to provide information on the phone or by email.

- Concern was raised that the figures for 2018 were a one off and might not be achievable again.
This could be true but the figures often varied year on year and not wildly. The Empty Homes Co-ordinator explained that at any given time there were some parameters that tended to provide an overview. In West Somerset, the long term empty figures often fell between the parameters of 200 and 240 properties. There were unlikely to be major changes but that can happen on occasions. Also large housing developments could have an impact on the figures, the Empty Homes Co-ordinator explained that the North Taunton Woolaway Project would have an impact on the TDBC figures because whilst the work was carried out on the properties a large number would be classed as empty.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee:-

- a) Noted the contents of the report;
- b) Endorsed the activities that reduced the number of empty homes as they could effectively bring properties back into use; and
- c) Urged the Shadow Authority to seriously consider increasing the resource into the area of empty homes work.

SC 21 Scrutiny Committee Work Plan

The following items were highlighted for the Forward Plan for the meeting scheduled for 22 November 2018:-

Members were reminded that if they had an item they wanted to add to the agenda, that they should send their requests to the Scrutiny Officer.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- The Parking Task and Finish Report had been pushed back to the December meeting to allow time for its completion.
- The Invest to Save Report had been added to the November meeting.
- The Leader highlighted a concern on the lack of higher level training available for nurses in the area which meant they did not stay in the area to work and suggested a report could be discussed at a future meeting.

RESOLVED that the content of the Work Plan be noted.

The meeting closed at 5.37pm.